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By: DAVID LEVINSKY

EVESHAM - John Adler may be a Democrat, but the freshman congressman says his party allegiance won't move him to vote for any type of health care reform bill that doesn't significantly address the issue of rising costs.

"We spend more per person on health care than any country in the world, but our businesses and families can't afford it," Adler, D-3rd of Cherry Hill, told the roomful of people who showed for a Saturday morning town hall meeting at the Evesham Municipal Building.

The meeting comes just before the Senate Finance Committee is expected to vote on a new reform bill that some in Congress feel may be able to garner more widespread support than an earlier House version.

Adler, while optimistic that health care reform is achievable, remained adamant that more needs to be done to control costs. During the hour-half long meeting he reiterated his promise to vote against any bill that he believes does not adequately address costs.

"If we don't do more (to reduce costs) now, we'll never be able to do it. So let's get it right now," the congressman said.

And while members of the largely conservative crowd in attendance said they appreciated his strong fiscal stand on health care reform, several in the audience also took him to task for his past votes on the federal stimulus package and energy bill.

"You're going to raise the electric bills of everyone and you passed a phony economic package that'll cost my children trillions," said Ed Benning of Delran.

"I can't believe we've gotten to the staggering material debt we have now," added Kurt Weichert of Evesham. "There's such disconnect between the way we live and the way government spends."

Despite the sometimes rampant criticism, Adler remained cool and attentive, occasionally cracking jokes to diffuse some of the angriest diatribes and stating that it was his job to stand in front of the crowd and listen.

At the meeting's start he told the assembled audience the only ground rule was "you can yell at me, but don't yell at the other speakers."

He also defended the stimulus package, arguing that even a conservative newspaper like the Wall Street Journal has opined that it helped prevent the country from falling into a deeper recession and that provisions such as the first-home buyer tax credit have helped stabilize the housing market.

On the federal energy bill, which creates a nationwide cap-and-trade system for carbon emissions, Adler argued that the measure would reduce electricity rates in New Jersey because the state is already part of a cap-and-trade system with nine Northeast states.

"For New Jersey, it's very clear that we will see a reduction in our utility rates from this bill," he said.

Those issues aside, health care reform remained the chief concern for most of the meeting. While most of the audience voiced opinions against the proposed reform, a few urged Adler to support the Democratic reform bill, arguing that it was needed to assist the millions of uninsured Americans.

"I'm uninsured, but I worked all my life," Evesham resident Sandra Lubrano said from the microphone.

Adler said he supported providing some type of public option in a reform bill, arguing that it would increase competition among private health insurance companies.

"A public option would be a real hammer in some areas without competition," he said, adding that he also favors permitting insurance companies to write policies to out-of-state residents.

When asked why tort reform is not currently included in a House reform bill, Adler responded that it "absolutely should be discussed" but that he believes a better solution to the problem of overly defensive and costly medicine may be for medical experts to create reasonable standards.

"I'm not talking rationing," Adler said. "Let's have medical experts decide what is reasonable. If physicians are sued, they can point to those standards."